

Walking My Seventy-Five-Year-Old Dog

She's painfully slow,
so I often have to stop and wait
while she examines some
 roadside weeds
as if she were reading the
 biography of a famous dog.

And she's not a pretty sight
 anymore,
dragging one of her hind legs,
her coat too matted to brush or
 comb,
and a snout white as a
 marshmallow.

We usually walk down a disused
 road
that runs along the edge of a lake,
whose surface trembles in a high
 wind
and is slow to ice over as the
 months grow cold.

We don't walk very far before
she sits down on her worn
haunches
and looks up at me with her
rheumy eyes.
Then it's time to carry her back to
the car.

Just thinking about the honesty in
her eyes,
I realize I should tell you
she's not really seventy-five. She's
fourteen.
I guess I was trying to appeal to
your sense
of the bizarre, the curiosities of
the sideshow.
I mean who really cares about
another person's dog?
Everything else I've said is true,
except the part about her being
fourteen.

I mean she's old, but not that old,
and it's not polite to divulge the
true age of a lady.

Contemporary Americans

I was trying to make my way
across a busy street in San
Francisco,
while carrying the new anthology
of poetry
I'd been flipping through earlier
that morning—
with my pot of tea and two pieces
of cinnamon toast—
in which I was wedged between
James Tate and Bob Dylan
because the poets were arranged
old to young, according to age.

I had to avoid a couple of cars,
cross over two sets of trolley
tracks,
and dodge a guy with a ski cap on
a bicycle
in order to get across the street
and enter
one of the city's many hospitable
parks

with their hedges, benches, and
shade trees
and often girls on a blanket, a
 juggler, an old man doing tai-
chi.

And that's where I lay down on
the soft grass,
closed my eyes, and after a little
while
began to picture the three of us
lined up in a row
according to the editor's wishes,
sliding out of our mothers in
order, one after the other,
then ending up pressed together
on a shelf
in a corner bookstore, yodeling
away in the dark.

Paris in May

A teddy bear in a store window,
three housepainters
waiting to cross a boulevard,
a woman in a café, her red nails
on a man's nape while she
smokes—
what are we to make of all this?

In the church of Saint-Sulpice,
the Virgin holds her baby to her
chest
as she stands on the round earth,
appearing to be unaware
of the serpent she is crushing
with one foot.
Outside, four stone lions guard a
fountain.

Is this a puzzle I am meant to
solve
before the evening bells ring
again—

here a man wearing a newspaper
hat,
there a child alone on a flowery
balcony?
An outdoor table on Rue Cassette
seemed a good enough place to
sort things out.
And sure enough,
after two milky-green glasses of
Pernod,
the crowd flowed around me like
a breeze,
and I found a link between my
notebook
and the soft Parisian sky,
both being almost the same pale
shade of blue.

And It's Raining Outside, Which Always Adds

About a month ago, I bought a
small transistor radio in a junk
shop
run by a man as tall as a
grandfather clock,
a pink plastic one from the
nineteen fifties,
which plays only love songs from
the past,
as if the radio had a memory and
a melancholy disposition.

I like to turn the little bezel with
my thumb
so the volume is down so low, the
songs
sound as if they're coming from
another room
in a boardinghouse in a run-
down part of town.
Then I lie down and lock my
hands behind my head.

Tonight, "They Say It's Spring"
is making all the boarders in the
boardinghouse sad,
but that's the way it is with every
song,
whether it's "April in Paris" or
"Autumn in New York,"
which were both written by the
same guy,

but the boarders are too unhappy
to care about that,
the men sitting on the edges of
their beds,
and the women looking out the
only window at the rain
where a taxicab as yellow as
forsythia is turning a corner
to God knows where and God
knows who,
and God knows why "You Go to
My Head" is playing now,
bringing down all the poor souls
in the boardinghouse,
which vanished when I heard
someone speak and opened my
eyes.

Life Expectancy

On the morning of a birthday that
ended in a zero,
I was looking out at the garden
when it occurred to me that the
robin
on her worm-hunt in the dewy
grass
had a good chance of outliving
me,
as did the worm itself for that
matter
if he managed to keep his worm-
head down.

It was not always like this.
For decades, I could assume
that I would be around longer
than the squirrel dashing up a
tree
or the nightly raccoons in the
garbage,
longer than the barred owl on a
branch,

the ibis, the chicken, and the
horse,

longer than four deer in a
clearing
and every creature in the zoo
except the elephant and the
tortoise,
whose cages I would hurry past.
It was just then in my
calculations
that the cat padded noiselessly
into the room,
and it seemed reasonable,
given her bright eyes and glossy
coat,
to picture her at my funeral,
dressed all in black, as usual,
which would nicely set off her
red collar,
some of the mourners might
pause in their grieving to
notice,
as she found a place next to a
labradoodle
in a section of the church
reserved for their kind.

Sleeping on My Side

Every night, no matter where I
am
when I lie down, I turn
my back on half the world.

At home, it's the east I ignore,
with its theaters and silverware,
as I face the adventurous west.

But when I'm out on the road
in some hotel's room 213 or 402
I could be pointed anywhere,

yet I hardly care as long as you
are there facing the other way
so we are defended in all degrees

and my left ear is pressing down
as if listening for hoofbeats in the
ground.

The Floors of Bonnard

Surely the slanted tables are
responsible
for all the shattered crockery,
the puddles of wine, and the
clumps of butter
that must end up on the rarely
seen floors
in the colorful paintings of Pierre
Bonnard.

Tilting the table forward in the
direction
of the viewer is one way
to make more visible the red-
orange tablecloth

and all the objects resting on it:
the plates and saucers, the
creamers,
wineglasses, vases, and delicate
teacups.

But what about the poor wife of
Bonnard?

Why is she never glimpsed
amidst all the colorful fabrics,
reds, pale blues, and vermillion
dots,
bearing her broom, her dustpan,
and her putrid mop?

Down on the Farm

Whenever the conversation turns
to the subject
of Tennessee Fainting goats,
the question that always comes
up is why.

Are they so squeamish that they
faint

like Victorian ladies whenever
the farmer

uses language unbecoming a
gentleman?

Or is it catching, one goat fainting
because he sees another one
fainting,

but that still leaves open the
question

of what makes the first goat faint.

Does the memory of having
keeled

over one morning make one keel
over again?

Are they in love? Or is it all just
too much?

No one seems to know for sure
but it's something to think about
when I'm trying to get to sleep at
night

or when I'm looking out a
window

at the barn and the fenced-in
pastures beyond.

To see a goat stiffen before
pitching over on its side
with a thump is truly unnerving,
but when he rises in a minute or
two, as if from the dead,
and goes back to munching with
his head down

in the sweet grass on these
hillsides,

then everything seems okay
again, just like before.

Imperial Garden

It was at the end of dinner,
the two of us in a red booth
maintaining our silence,
when I decided to compose a
message
for the fortune cookie you were
soon to receive.

*Avoid mulishness when choosing
a position on the great board game
of life*

was my mean-spirited contribution
to the treasury of Confucian
wisdom.

But while we waited for the
cookies,
the slices of oranges,
and the inescapable pot of watery
tea,
I realized that by *mulishness*
I meant your refusal to let me

have my own way every time I
wanted it.

I watched you looking off to the
side—
your mass of dark hair,
your profile softened by lamplight
—

and then I made up a fortune for
myself.

*He who acts like a jerk
on an island of his own creation
will have only the horizon for a
friend.*

I seemed to be getting worse at
this,
I thought, as the cookies arrived at
the table
along with the orange slices
and a teapot painted with tigers
menacingly peering out from the
undergrowth.

The restaurant was quiet then.
The waiter returned to looking out
at the street,
a zither whimpered in the
background,

and we turned to our cookies,
cracking the brittle shells,
then rolling into little balls
the tiny scrolls of our destinies
before dropping them, unread, into
our cups of tea—
a little good-luck thing we'd been
doing ever since we met.

Mice

I was normally alone in my
childhood,
a condition that gave me time
to observe the activities of the
many mice
that had infested our house
one winter night when the house
next door burned to a crisp.

They all ran across the snow-
covered lawn to find places
to hide in their new home;
then later they discovered the
kitchen,
which was like Columbus
discovering
America, because the kitchen was
already there.

I became their only spectator
like someone alone in a movie
house.

I could even tell some of them
apart,
but I resisted giving them names,
afraid they would all disappear
if our house happened to burst
into flames.

O, anonymous companions,
appearing in a hole in the wall,
always scurrying out of my reach,
so many hours I would watch
your comings and goings,
before someone called me down
to dinner;

you were the beginning of
cinema for me
and one of the reasons
I am the way I am this morning—
an elderly child with a tummy
full of oatmeal and a mouse on
my shoulder,
standing on its hind legs,
whispering in my ear.

Prospect

I'm high up
on a kitchen chair
so I can reach

a clear glass vase
to put some flowers in
and just to have a look around.

From up here everything
is an aerial drawing
of a kitchen, with the sink, the
stove,

and the tall refrigerator
conveying a plummeting
sensation
as if all their vertical lines ended
in hell.

Yes, I'm getting a slightly
different
sense of things from up here

but that's really about it. In fact,

I wouldn't recommend this to
anyone.

Chances are you will feel silly
standing on a chair in the kitchen
once you finished whatever
it was you climbed up there to do

—

a far cry from the originality

of Petrarch, grandfather of the
sonnet,

who is thought to be
the first person in known history

to ascend a mountain
to the very top
just for the sake of the view.

Evening Wind

is the title of one of Edward
Hopper's
pen-and-ink drawings,
which I spent some time looking
at
in a gallery on the far west side of
town.

Hopper could have called it
*Totally Naked Woman Crawling
on All Fours into an Unmade Bed*
for she does occupy the
foreground fully,

so it was only later that I noticed
the curtains behind her being
lifted
by what must be an evening
wind.

Then I noticed that the woman
appears

to be looking at those curtains,

her face hidden by the dark
curtain of her hair.
Or is she looking through the
curtains
at the jagged outline of the city
buildings,

topped with water tanks in
silhouette?
It was not until I closed my eyes
and imagined
her gradually falling asleep
after sliding naked under the
covers
that I could envision the evening
wind,
not just the wind as revealed by
the curtains,
but the invisible wind itself
blowing
through the room of this
ingeniously titled drawing.

Whiskers

I'm in a large brown armchair
sipping an espresso from a tiny
cup,
and with the other hand
I'm stroking the whiskers on my
face,
the ones that grew while I was
asleep,
a night's worth of whiskers
and proof of my continuing
existence.

Samuel Johnson refuted the
position
of the great philosopher
Bishop (George) Berkeley
on the existence of material
objects
by kicking him in the head,
if my historical memory serves,
but all I need is a face full of
whiskers.

The whiskers of Dr. Johnson
(1709–1784)
are no more, likewise the
Bishop's (1685–1753),
but mine keep lengthening
night and day every day and
night,
one amazing millimeter at a time,
and no brutal assault on a
clergyman
is needed to prove the daily
surprise of my being.

Walking Under the Trees

I'm walking under the trees
walking in and out of their
 shadows
walking step by step under the
 trees
so the leaves on their lowest
 branches
graze my bare head
as I walk slowly under the trees
so close to me they could have
their arms around my shoulders,
walking under the guardian
 trees.

I'm walking under the trees
plucking a leaf
and putting it in my pocket
so I won't forget walking
under the cloak of these trees
thinking of nothing else
but the trees and me walking

under all their leaves and
branches
walking all morning under the
trees.

Whale Day

Today I was awakened by strong
coffee
and the awareness that the earth
is busy with whales
even though we can't see any
unless we have embarked on a
whale watch,
which would be disappointing if
we still couldn't see any.

I can see the steam rising from
my yellow cup,
the usual furniture scattered
about,
and even some early light
filtering through the palms.

Meanwhile, thousands of whales
are cruising
along at various speeds under the
seas,

crisscrossing one another,
slaloming in and out
of the Gulf Stream, some with
their calves
traveling alongside—such big
blunt heads they have!

So is it too much to ask that one
day a year
be set aside for keeping in mind
while we step onto a bus,
consume a ham sandwich,
or stoop to pick up a coin from a
sidewalk
the multitude of these mammoth
creatures
coasting between the continents,
some for the fun of it, others
purposeful in their journeys,

all concealed under the sea,
unless somewhere
one breaks the surface
with an astonishing upheaval of
water
and all the people in yellow
slickers

rush to one side of the boat to
point and shout
and wonder how to tell their
friends about the day they saw
a whale?

Two



The Wild Barnacle

*Do not speak, wild barnacle,
passing over this mountain...*

—PATRICK PEARSE

In a lullaby by the Irish poet
Patrick Pearse,
a woman of the mountain begins
singing her baby to sleep
by asking Mary to kiss her baby's
mouth
and Christ to touch its cheek,
then she gets busy quieting the
world around her.

All the grey mice must be still
as well as the moths fluttering
at the cottage window lit by the
child's golden head.

Then, amazing to me—
one summer night when I first read
the poem—
she orders a barnacle, of all things,

not to speak as it passes over a
mountain.

To me, a barnacle came with a
shell,
lived underwater, and stayed put
after silently affixing itself to a
rock,
but here in the hands of a poet,
the small creature is miraculously
endowed with the powers of
speech and flight.

I could see it now on a
mountaintop,
its black shell shiny with salt
water,
no more than two inches tall,
but dancing and riotous with joy
and rage,
shouting the anthem of the
barnacle,
loud enough to wake up
every baby in Connemara and
beyond.

But, of course, it is the barnacle
goose
that Pearse had in mind, I later
found out,

common in the west of Ireland
and quite capable of flight with a
honk
that could possibly alarm a
sleeping baby.

For a moment, I had my own wild
barnacle,
but the barnacle goose is fact,
and so is the fact that Patrick
Pearse,
known as the schoolmaster,
was the one who proclaimed the
independence of Ireland
from the steps of the General Post
Office,
and for his troubles he was stood
up
with fourteen other
insurrectionists—
save Connolly who was seated
due to a recently shattered ankle—

yes, was stood up against the fact
of a wall,
in a courtyard of Kilmainham Gaol,
Dublin,
and executed by a British firing
squad

in his final May in the terrible,
beautiful year of 1916.

Objectivity

Call it a compulsion, but every
time

I give someone a new poem to
look at,

I feel compelled to hide
somewhere
and read that poem
as if I were that other person.

Pretending to be someone else
brings a new sense of objectivity,
revealing the poem's many flaws,
and suddenly makes me aware
of the pointlessness of having
written it
and the sheer vanity of the entire
enterprise.

Sometimes,
such a clarification may occur
without the help of another
person,

but then I don't experience the
relief
that comes from no longer
being me, if only for the time
it takes to read a poem on a single
page.

Then I'm George, or Art, or even
Suzannah,
none of whom wrote that poem;
thus I am able to read it
as if for the first time,
as if I'd never written it,

as if no one had ever written it
for that matter,
as if I were not acquainted
with anyone named George, Art,
or Suzannah.

Now there is no poem, and no
more me,
yet here I am, swaying
in the hammock of my
nonexistence.

But after only a few ticks of this,

I'm back in the room where I
write
and back on my old schedule—
the tartan cover lifted from the
grindstone,
boot on the foot treadle,
nose lowering to the task.

Banana School

The day I learned that monkeys
as well as chimps, baboons, and
gorillas
all peel their bananas from the
other end
and use the end we peel from as
a handle,
I immediately made the switch.

I wasted no time in passing this
wisdom on
to family, friends, and even
strangers
as I am now passing it on to you
—
a tip from the top, the banana
scoop,
the inside primate lowdown.

I promise: once you try it
you will never go back except
to regret the long error of your
ways.

And if you do not believe me,
swing by the local zoo some
afternoon
with a banana in your pocket
and try peeling it in front of the
cage
of an orangutan or capuchin
monkey,
and as you begin, notice
how the monkeys stop what
they're doing,
if they are doing anything at all,
to nod their brotherly approval
through the bars.

Better still, try it out on the big
silverback gorilla.
See if you can get his dark eyes to
brighten a bit
as the weight of him sits there in
his cage
the same way Gertrude Stein is
sitting
in that portrait of her she never
liked by Picasso.

Identity

Shortly after it was discovered
that Homer was not the author
of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*,
that, in fact, the *Iliad* was written
by another poet of the time
named Homer
while the source of the *Odyssey*
remained unclear,
it was also discovered that God
did not create the universe.

It turns out that the creator
of this whole mishmash
was the identical twin brother of
God,
even though no one in heaven
had ever been able to tell them
apart,
even on weekends, when they
never wore the same outfit.

Does this mean that in the future

no one will know the difference
between a raven and a crow
or John Adams from John Quincy
Adams?

and that you and I
will not be able to recognize one
another?

That would be horrible,
plus, I would hate that
because I so much enjoy dining
with you
and going on car trips with you
navigating,

not to mention the pleasure
of sleeping in the same bed with
you
with the backs of our heads
and the soles of our feet touching

so that we'd look like a giant
arrowhead
if we ever became visible from
space,
like smoke from a vast fire or the
Great Wall of China.

Arizona

In the marbled silence of the
desert
it's easy to pick out the songs of
birds,
which puts me in a better state of
mind
than the one I wake up to some
mornings
as I lie in bed worrying about the
same five things
I will still be worried about on
my deathbed
if I am lucky enough to have a
deathbed
and not a tall death-wave or a
deep death-lake
or a dizzying death-cliff, a death-
gun or a death-knife,
and death is only one of the five
nightly hounds
that prowl in circles around my
bed.

And so, you birds of Arizona,
I am lucky to spend this time with
you
amid the amber rocks and
sudden wildflowers
to listen to your sweet mix of
songs,
sorry I am not as knowledgeable
as the woman
who just hurried past me up the
switchback trail
with her binoculars and her bird
book,
but grateful for the perfect
acoustics
of your company in the lowering
heat,
knowing that in mornings to
come
I might recall that you and I were
truly here.

Irish Spider

It was well worth traveling this
far

just to sit in a box of sunlight
by a window in a cottage

with a steaming cup of tea
and to watch an Irish spider
waiting
at the center of his dewy web

pretending to be just any spider
at all—
a spider without a nation—
but not fooling me for a minute.

*Listening to Hank Mobley
Around 11 O'Clock*

*After a Long Fun Boozy
Dinner, the Four of Us,
at Captain Pig's, Our
Favorite Restaurant in
Town*

I'm lying down now, solo on a
couch,
imagining along with the music
that if I were, say, 15 or 16 tonight
and in possession of a fresh can
of pink or orange spray paint,
I would climb the 4th Street
overpass
and write in big letters
HANK MOBLEY SWINGS
for all to see on their morning
drive to work.

But having sailed some time ago

into the quiet cardigan harbor of
my life,
out of earshot of the siren songs
that lure men onto reefs of
foolishness
not to mention the bridges of
bravado,
it's enough to let the soap bubble
of that Hank Mobley thought drift
slowly
across the living room and burst
with no warning, much to the
amazement of the cat.

The Card Players

I'm glad Cézanne was not here in
Key West
to set up an easel, and paint
the card game I was in last night,
unless he was really good at
depicting despondency.

Cézanne once said that a single
carrot,
if painted in a completely fresh
way,
would be enough to set off a
revolution.
I'll bet he was sitting in a café
that day

where such observations are
usually made,
but if I had been sitting in that
café
across from Cézanne, I would
have quipped,

“Maybe if Bugs Bunny were in
charge of things,”

and I would have described in a
fresh way
how the famous rabbit might be
portrayed
using a carrot to point the mob to
the Bastille.

Beer and chips and more beer
and chips
were served at the poker table,
but no carrot soup, a staple on
every menu
in the bunny rabbit stories of
Beatrix Potter
and a dish that would have
warmed me
inside and out the way a good
soup does
and made me feel much better
about losing all my money and
then some.

But at least now I have found the
answer

to the old question of who would
you invite
to your ideal dinner party:
Paul Cézanne, Bugs Bunny,
Beatrix Potter,
and okay, maybe at the last
minute, Gore Vidal.

Vivace!

*No man is lonely while eating
spaghetti.*

—CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

This time, I was at a corner table
at Pasta Vivace!
on that side street next to the old
music store.
The place was not at all crowded.
Just enough young men and
women
were coming and going to keep
me
occupied as I sipped my Campari
and soda
and waited for the waiter to
arrive with my pasta.

I imagined what the parents of all
these people
were doing this evening,
then I thought of all of the diners
as babies

with looks of amazement on their
tiny faces.

Then as they kept arriving and
departing,
holding the door for one another,
they turned into skeletons in
their caskets,

each being carried by six husky
pallbearers,
who would also be dead by now,
as I would be before too long,
for death is the magnetic north of
poetry.

But first, I must insist on having
the pleasure
of eating my *linguini con vongole*,
dipping chunks of crusty bread
into the briny sauce,

for this is also a poem about
happiness,
a celebration of the senses
and of all the men and women
coming and going.

And if you turn your head a little
this way,
you can see me at a corner table,

twirling the pasta with a fork and
spoon
like an infant with a bib tucked
under his chin.

A Terrible Beauty

April is the cruelest month...

—T. S. ELIOT

If you happened to miss this year's
Cruelest Month Competition,
it began with all twelve contestants
taking the stage together
in the order of the calendar year,
each dressed in outfits
that sang of their personalities—
March windblown and wet with
rain,
October resplendent in red and
orange.

Many wondered why April, a
perennial loser,
would even bother to show up,
always smiling, daffodils
embroidered on her bodice.
Some blamed it on a poem she'd
read somewhere.

Others followed her early
elimination—
August with zinc slathered on her
nose,
December looking like the Mother
of God.
It must be said that no one was
surprised
when the tuxedoed man with the
microphone
finally announced this year's
winner,
the same as every year since its
beginning.

Even though she'd shivered
during the swimsuit part
and stumbled when asked
how she planned to change the
world,
February was the obvious choice.
*I mean the Super Bowl's over by
then
and spring's a mile away.*
What could be crueller? as one guy
put it.
And that was about it, except for
the coronation.

There she stood, the only month on
the stage,
crying a few chilly tears,
a thin smile frozen on her lips.
Then she bent her knees a little
so as to be less tall,
and some official placed on her
head
her latest dripping, silvery crown
of ice.

Duck Blind

The idea behind a duck blind
is that any duck flying over it

will be blind to its existence,
seeing (or not seeing in the case
of the duck)

how well the blind was
camouflaged
with branches and leaves

to fit in with its natural
surroundings.

Ignorant of the blind, a duck

has a better shot of being shot,
then tumbling out of the sky,

wing over useless wing,
only to land in the reeds of a
marsh,

a clump of plumage now,
blind to everything, and deaf, too,

to the barking of the wet dogs,
to more gunfire later in the
morning,

and to the soft talk of the hunters
waiting there, concealed by the
blind.

She's Gone

leaving me here alone again,
feeling this time
like one of those pairs of
drawings
featured in the colorful puzzle
section
of the Sunday paper,
where you have to detect
the barely detectable differences
between the two.

Needless to say,
I am the drawing on the right
where items are found to be
missing—
the guitar now down to four
strings,
the bouquet with one flower
gone,
the teacup minus its handle,
no longer able to be gracefully
raised.

That's the new me—
no more sweet tunes, perfume, or
chamomile.

And then there is the milking
stool
where the farmer used to sit
every morning and evening
squeezing the milk from his herd.
But one of its legs is absent now,
and the farmer has toppled over
in his straw hat and overalls,
only to land beneath
the poor brindled cow in the
drawing,
now minus a mark from her
flank
and all four of her munificent
udders erased.

Downpour

Last night we ended up on the
couch
trying to remember
all of the friends who had died so
far,

and this morning I wrote them
down
in alphabetical order
on the flip side of a shopping list
you had left on the kitchen table.

So many of them had been swept
away
as if by a hand from the sky,
it was good to recall them,
I was thinking
under the cold lights of a
supermarket
as I guided a cart with a wobbly
wheel
up and down the long, strident
aisles.

I was on the lookout for
blueberries,
English muffins, linguini, heavy
cream,
light bulbs, apples, Canadian
bacon,
and whatever else was on the list,
which I managed to keep grocery
side up,
until I had passed through the
electric doors,
where I stopped to realize,
as I turned the list over,
that I had forgotten Terry O'Shea
as well as the bananas and the
bread.

It was pouring by then,
spilling, as they say in Ireland,
people splashing across the lot to
their cars.

And that is when I set out,
walking slowly and precisely,
a soaking-wet man
bearing bags of groceries,
walking as if in a procession
honoring the dead.

I felt I owed this to Terry,
who was such a strong painter,
for almost forgetting him
and to all the others who had
formed
a circle around him on the screen
in my head.

I was walking more slowly now
in the presence of the compassion
the dead were extending to a
comrade,
plus, I was in no hurry to return
to the kitchen, where I would have
to tell you
all about Terry and the bananas
and the bread.

Three



Safe Travels

Every time Gulliver travels
into another chapter of *Gulliver's
Travels*

I marvel at how well traveled he
is
despite his incurable gullibility.

I don't enjoy traveling anymore
because, for instance,
I still don't know the difference
between a *bloke* and a *chap*.

And I'm embarrassed
whenever I have to hold out a
palm
of loose coins to a cashier
as if I were feeding a pigeon in a
park.

Like Proust, I see only trouble
in store if I leave my room,
which is not lined with cork,
only sheets of wallpaper

featuring orange flowers
and little green vines.
Of course, anytime I want
I can travel in my imagination
but only as far as Toronto,
where some graduate students
with goatees and snoods
are translating my poems into
Canadian.

Hawaii

As you and I walked
through the palm forest of W. S.
Merwin,
our guide was telling us how it
began
in an abandoned pineapple grove
and that the soil, now without
nutrients,
had to be revived before
anything would grow.

The palms came from all over the
world,
he said, and anyone who worked
here
had to know their Latin names by
heart.
The immense forest was hard to
see
for the ranks of individual trees.
But back home, this morning, you
can't miss

the four Chinese-red pots on the
back deck
with the young palms sprouting
from the seeds you picked up
from the litter of seeds on the
forest floor,
the ones you showed me on our
flight home,
wrapped up like little mummies
in paper towels.
This is not how the pig got his
curly tail
or how the zebra got its stripes,
but it is how we happen to have
some of the work
of W. S. Merwin growing here in
Florida
in addition to his other major
works
lined up in some rough order on
a high shelf inside.

The Emperor of Ice Cubes

Three small, nondescript
shorebirds,
probably sandpipers,
investigating a clump of dry
seaweed
in the tideline,
another one racing
along the water's shifting edge,
legs, thin as pencil lead,
scissoring back and forth in the
wet sand.

I might have left it at that,
a beachgoer's morning take,
if an ice cube I tossed
hadn't landed near them
and if one of them did not start
pecking and even sipping at it,
while rebuffing the others
if they neared this prize in the
sand.

What would a pecking bird
make of this frozen curio

beyond something cold to peck at?
Did it fall from outer space?
Would it remind the bird
of its second home in the Arctic,
where sandpipers migrate
flying mostly by night,
with lots of ice to peck at on
arrival?

Imagine—a bird missing the cold
while pecking at an ice cube
as it melted in the Florida sand.

In the end, it hardly mattered
if or what the bird was thinking.
The bottled beer in the Igloo cooler,
source of the magical cube,
where many other ice cubes
lay gathered, was still very cold.
And it all seemed framed for me,
this bigger seascape,
when I leaned back to look—
nothing but pale blue sky,
clouds pushed around in the wind,
and bright white waves
rolling over one another,
then breaking on the sand.

I Am Not Italian

I am not Italian, technically
speaking,
yet here I am leaning on a zinc
bar in Perugia
on a sunny weekday morning,
my foot up on the worn iron
railing
just like the other men who,
it must be said, are officially and
fully Italian.

It's 8:40 and they are off to work,
some in offices, others sweeping
the streets
while I am off to a museum or a
church
to see paintings, maybe light a
candle in an alcove.
Yet here we all are in our suits
and work shirts
joined in the brotherhood of
espresso,

or how is it said? *La fratellanza
dell'espresso*,
draining our little white cups
with an artful rotation of the
wrist,
each of us tasting the same
sweetness of life,
if you take a little sugar, and the
bitterness
of its brevity, whether you choose
to take sugar or not.

The Symphony Orchestra of San Miguel de Allende

The Symphony Orchestra of San
Miguel de Allende
is not made up of the usual
instruments.

Instead of brass, strings, and
woodwinds,
there are church bells, roosters,
doves, and barking dogs,
all of which predate the horn, the
violin, and the oboe,
notably the rooster, who crowed
even before the time of Christ.

The orchestra plays all day and
into the night,
but the music is most alive in the
early morning
when much of the audience is half
asleep
and not distracted by their jobs
and errands as they will be later in
the day.

At first, as I listened from my
canopied bed,
it sounded like a jumble of noise
until I imagined a gigantic score
written centuries ago by the
Mozart of Mexico,

the genius who decided those dogs
should come in
just after the thirty-two gongs of a
solemn bell,
who had the doves modulate into
an adagio,
and who added a rest here and
there
where the roosters should pause,
but not for long.
Are we not seekers of order, I
thought,
as when we follow the lines in our
palms
or connect the dots of the stars to
form a bear in the sky?

So before rising from our
slumberous beds,
why not listen a little longer
to this composition for dogs,
roosters, doves, and bells?

The dogs are barking to be fed.
The roosters are beckoning us to
the henhouse
where three eggs are still warm in
the straw.
But the doves are mourning our
awful losses,
and the bells are there to remind
us of God.

Dublin

So much to be viewed out here in
the drizzle
with all the tall buses swinging
themselves
so close to me around corners and
men
in bunches smoking outside the
betting parlors.

And when the rain falls steadily
enough
to drive me into a gallery or a city
castle,
then the learning also comes
pouring down
whether I am in the mood for it or
not.

Today, it's the codex of Leonardo
on display
in the dim light where you touch a
screen
to turn a page, the margins busy
with pulleys

and siphons, whirlwinds, tides, and
sluices.

And better informed was I to read
on a little card
the news that Herbert Hoover
translated
into English for the first time the
works
of Agricola, the father of modern
mineralogy himself.
Out the windows of the gallery,
a jumble of raincoats and black
umbrellas,
and so my afternoon education
continues
with the discovery in a vitrine of
Vegetius,
who in the fifth century came up
with the idea of underwater
warfare,
hand-to-hand combat beneath the
lily pads
as if bloodying one another on the
ground were not enough.

And if his illustration of an armed
soldier
standing on the bottom of a lake

and breathing through a snake-like
tube
comes at me tonight and shakes me
out of sleep,

I will not coax an oval pill from its
bottle
nor put on a robe and stand by the
stove
looking at the ads in a magazine
while some milk is heating in a
pan.

I only need to slide into place
the image of Leonardo at a table by
a window,
his marvelous head resting in his
hands,
wondering if water might exist on
the moon.

Cremation

It's half the binary of fire or earth,
but the question of where one's
ashes
will go has many more answers
than two.

Scattering is the option *du jour*,
maybe over a favorite body of
water—
a lake where she learned to fish,
an ocean he liked to stare into
toward the end.

Others pick multiple locations—
a ballpark, a backyard,
a rose garden, and the roof of a
gym.
And guess who's not here to divide
the nearly weightless powder into
equal parts?

Shake your heads, but bear in
mind
that without a wish

you could end up in a coffee can
on a high shelf, your widow
glancing up—
but not frequently enough—from
an armchair.
I've always thought "hither and
thither"
would make things easy on my
survivors,
who would dither, then laughing
toss
handfuls of me from a speeding
convertible.

But wouldn't the easiest spot of all
be
the nearby fireplace or Franklin
stove,
where I, who enjoyed walking
amid the yellow-green trees of
spring
or the bare, crisscross branches of
winter,

would at last be indistinguishable
from the cinders of the maple,
the mighty oak, and even the pale
mountain ash.

Now, I'm not sure how you heard
it,
but in my version, Bob Hope's wife
asked her husband on his deathbed
whether he wanted to be buried or
cremated.

"Surprise me," replied the comic
before expiring.

Lakeside Cottage: Ontario

When I mentioned to you on the
phone
that I had just witnessed a flock of
Canada geese
flying in a V only a few feet above
the surface of the lake,
you asked if I had taken a picture.
I told you no, because the phone
was up to my ear
as I waited for you to answer and
also because
it rarely occurs to me to take a
picture of anything.
So let me make a picture of the
geese for you now.

There were at least thirty of them,
appearing
quite suddenly, just after I dialed
your number,
from behind the trees by the shore,
now heavy with the greenery of
midsummer,

and they flew from right to left
like a text written in Hebrew,
almost touching the slightly ruffled
water
as they passed by the dock at the
end of the lawn.

You know, the dock with the little
flight of stairs
that disappears into the lake,
which made it easier
for your parents to go in for a swim
in the cold water before they both
died
only months apart, as if Jack
followed Mary's lead.
Otherwise, they might be sitting
here now
in the two chairs by the picture
window,
maybe holding cups of morning
coffee,

as all the geese sailed by, heading
who knows where,
so close to the water, each holding
its position,
the leader pointing the way with its
neck

extended, as if he were pulling the others along.

The Convergence of My Parents

This morning I am looking out
my window
at a crowd of white irises,
imagining that I am my mother
in 1934
looking out the window of her
train,
the one she rode from Toronto to
Los Angeles
to work as a nurse in Queen of
Angels Hospital,
only her train has stopped
outside a little town
somewhere in the Midwest,
and she is looking out at the irises
in someone's garden.

Around that time, maybe my
young father
from Massachusetts was riding
another train from Boston to
Galveston

to work as an electrician on an
offshore oil rig,
a man who was more likely to be
reading a newspaper
than admiring the flowers in a
stranger's garden
but who must have spent some
time
looking out at the scenery,
wondering about himself,
and maybe a field of wildflowers
went flashing by.

I wouldn't be here looking at
irises
or anything else had they not
found each other years later,
the nonparallel lines of their lives
meeting in New York,
where I was born because I
wanted to be close
to my mother, my father liked to
joke.
She was still a nurse, and he was
her patient.
He had been struck on the
forehead by a tool

a co-worker had mishandled, and
that is the story
of how I got here, how I pulled
out of the first station of my life.

Dreaming of the Middle Ages

I've never laid eyes on a church
mouse,
but I know what it is to be as poor
as a graduate student,
for I spent many semesters
drinking discount beer
and eating a concoction
topped with melted cheese and hot
sauce
that was known at the time as
Kansas City Rice.

I was studying to be a medievalist,
and I often fell asleep in an
armchair
with a book still open on my lap
whose margins were crowded
with coded notations regarding
Beowulf, *The Mabinogion*,
Piers Ploughman, or *Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight*.

I wouldn't say I was eating and
breathing
the literature of the Middle Ages,
because, in fact, I was eating
Kansas City Rice
and breathing in pack after pack of
Marlboro Reds.

Yet these old tales and romances
followed me in my waking hours
and did not hesitate to enter my
dreams.

This was in Southern California,
and my bedroom was suffused
with the perfume of the nearby
orange groves.

There, I dallied with the Wife of
Bath
and rode along with the Parson
and the Prioress.

On one of these nights,
I even had a showdown with Sir
Gawain himself,
the two of us facing off
in a large mead hall full of
boisterous guests.

I had somehow sullied his honor,

and before I could utter a word of
apology,
with one mighty swing Gawain
passed his sword
through my middle, cutting me
precisely in two.

A raucous cheer went up from the
crowd
as my upper half toppled to the
floor with a sick thud.
Some of the knights and ladies
stood
in a circle around what was left of
me,
examining the many tree rings
now visible in my exposed lower
half,

while they stroked their chins
and marveled over the many rings
that represented my years in
graduate school.

Yes, that was a big chunk of my life,
and even though I've quit the
cigarettes
and I eat a lot better these days,

often in candlelight with a loving
woman,

I still write in the margins of books,
and in my dreams I still chase a
rabbit

with a ribbon tied around his neck
up and down the endless lanes of
an orange grove,
pursued in turn by Grendel and his
blood-caked mother.

The Yellow Wood

Two roads diverged in a yellow
wood,
then those two roads diverged
again
and kept diverging the way
branches
diverge into more branches to
form a tree,
which you fall out of one day and
die.

It's troubling to think of life that
way,
as a series of binary choices,
each one leaving behind a road
forsaken.
No, you can't go down two at a
time
and be both tailor and
candlestick maker.

But you're free to dream of the
other.

Take this poet, elbows on the sill,
imagining my life as a baker or
even a tinker,
that is, *a person who goes from
place to place*
[though I've grown weary of
traveling]

*mending metal utensils on his
way,*
as if the people who compiled
this dictionary had the foggiest
idea
what tinkering actually
demanded—
what solitude and hardship such
a life must entail!

My Funeral

After the eulogies and this and
that
and a blessing
and whatever follows,
as pedestrians outside walk along
under the leaning steeple
on their way to this place or that,
there will come a moment
when everyone will have had
quite enough.

Then the fox will tap
a music stand with his bow
and lift his violin,
and the badgers will raise their
horns
to their snarling badger lips,
ready to play what is required,
and the bear will gently set
his paws upon the upright bass.

And their playing will accompany
everyone
down the aisle and outdoors
into the weather of the day,
whatever it may be,
and down a block or two south,
then around a corner to a bar
with a neon beer sign in the
window.

And its interior will be a greeting,
full of blue shadows
with a streak of late-morning
light,
so that everyone is glad to be
alive
and sorry I couldn't be there,
and it's even okay
that the bartender turns out to be
a horse.

And as for me,
gliding off into space,
all I would ask as my final wish
is that you refrain, out of respect,
from shouting over the heads of
the others,

now two or three deep at the bar,
“When did the cow sell this
place?”

Wait your turn, then order up.
Today is no different in that
regard.

The Pregnant Man

A man is pregnant.
He doesn't know that he's
pregnant
but unlike the other men wearing
caps
at a shady table outside a café,
he wants to give birth
to something that is alive

even if it's only a short poem
breathing in and out,
a girl poem or a boy poem,
it wouldn't matter to his mighty
love.

Look at him now playing cards
while the old waiter goes about
his business.

Architecture at 3:30 A.M.

Brunelleschi
is asleep
in Florence.

Christopher Wren
is snoring
in a corner of London.

Louis Sullivan
is curled up
somewhere
in Chicago.

Only Dagwood is
awake at this hour
in his bathrobe
in the kitchen,
refrigerator door open,
a pickle jar
under one arm,
the mayonnaise
balanced
on a free elbow,
about to construct
another phenomenal

tower of a sandwich.
I don't care that no one
under 55 will know
who Dagwood is,
and no one over 55
will remember him.
Dagwood is still
standing in
the Bumstead kitchen,
bathed in refrigerator light,
knowing his hunger
will be appeased
but not before
he labors, along with all
the other geniuses,
under gravity's singular law.

The Garland

I would like to be laid to rest in a
big tomb
topped by a stone figure of an
angel,
who appears to have landed
there
in order to sob forevermore,
her face buried in her bent arm,
one folded wing hanging by her
side.

Then, whenever I found the time
to visit my own grave,
after approaching with slow,
respectful steps,
I would place around her rough
neck
the garland of wildflowers that I
knitted,
then run back to the car, laughing
and immortal!

Four



Me First

We often fly in the sky together,
and we're always okay—there's
our luggage now
waiting for us on the carousel.

And we drive lots of places
in all manner of hectic traffic,
yet here we are, pulling in the
driveway again.

So many opportunities to die
together,
but no meteor has hit our house,
no tornado has lifted us into its
funnel.

The odds say then that one of us
will go
before the other, like heading off
into a heavy snowstorm, leaving

the other one behind to stand in
the kitchen

or lie on the bed under the fan.
So why not let me, the older one,
go first?

I don't want to see you
everywhere
as I wait for the snow to stop,
before setting out with a crooked
stick, calling your name.

A Sight

Last night I watched a
documentary on war,
and the part I carry with me
today
is the spectacle of a line
of maybe twenty blinded soldiers
being led, single file
away from a yellow cloud of gas.

That might be what accounts
for this morning's brightness—
sunlight slathered over
everything
from the royal palms to the store
awnings,
from a blue Corolla at the curb
to a purple flower climbing a
fence,
one gift of sight after another.

I couldn't see their bandaged
faces,
but each man had one hand

resting on the shoulder
of the man in front of him,
so that every man was guiding
and being guided at the same
time,
and in the same tempo,
given the unison of their small,
cautious steps.

Air Sax

In the dorm rooms of our
snowbound college
during certain parts of the
Coltrane solos
featured on the album
Milestones,
parts we had deemed exceedingly
worthy,
we boys would play imaginary
tenor saxophones by placing a
thumb
in our mouths, leaving the free
hand
to handle the intricacies of the
fingering,

and with puffed-out cheeks and
eyes closed,
we would blow hard, instead of
sucking
as we had done in our infancy.
And even though we would step
back

to laugh at the silly pathos of
ourselves,
there was always great intensity
and joy in our playing.

English Roses

In those weeks of late summer
when the roses in gardens begin
to fade,

the big red, white, and pink ones
—

the inner enfolded petals growing
cankorous,

the petals at the edges turning
brown

or fallen already down on their
girlish backs

in the rough beds of turned-over
soil,

then how terrible the expressions
on their faces,

a kind of was-it-all-really-worth-it
look,

to die here in front of everybody
in the garden of a bed-and-
breakfast

in a provincial English market
town,

to expire by degrees of
corruption
in plain sight of all the neighbors
passing by—

the thin mail carrier, the stocky
butcher
(thank God the children pay no
attention),
the swiveling faces in the
windows of the tall buses,
and now this stranger staring
over the wall,
hair disheveled, a loose scarf
around his neck,
jotting in a notebook, something
about us no doubt,
about how terrible we must look
now under the punishing sun.

On the Deaths of Friends

Either they just die
or they get sick and die of the
sickness
or they get sick, recover, then die
of something else,
or they get sick, appear to
recover,
then die of the same thing,
the sickness coming back
to take another bite out of you
in the forest of your final hours.

And there are other ways,
which will not be considered
here.
In the evening, I closed my eyes
on the shore of a lake and I
pretended
this is what it will look like
or will not look like,
this is where my friends keep
going,

a “place” only in quotation
marks,

where, instead of oxygen, there is
silence
unbroken by the bark of a fox in
winter
or the whistle of a neglected
kettle.

With eyes still closed,
I ran in the dark toward that
silence,
like a man running along a train
platform,
and when I opened my eyes to
see
who was running in the other
direction

with outspread arms,
there was the lake again with its
ripples,
a breeze coming off the water,
and a low train whistle,
and there was I trembling
under the trees, passing clouds,
and everything else that was
pouring

over the mighty floodgates of the
senses.

Cupid

Fresh in from the rain,
you asked me
how long a cubit is.

I thought
the subject at hand
was love.

But it was an ark
you were building,
a little one, just for you.

Talking to Myself

When I talk to myself,
as I sit in a chair or pace the
 floor,
I don't bother to listen,
because my hearing is so bad
I wouldn't be able to pick out a
 word,
plus I have nothing new to say.

The sound of my voice was a
 comfort
when I used to sit by my bedside
reading to myself one animal
 fable
after another until the words
became the vowels of a lullaby
and I vanished under the blanket
 of sleep.

As a boy, I talked to each mailbox
I passed on my bicycle, a black
 Humber,

made in England, it said on the
frame.

I would pedal around the
neighborhood,
sitting up tall, arms hanging limp,
looking for the street that would
lead to England.

I'm not alone in talking to myself.
Children sit alone on a carpet,
talking to their imaginary
friends.

The elderly keep gabbing in
empty rooms.

A cow in a pasture is mooing to
herself.

The skylark is singing pointlessly
in the sky.

Down the street, a dog is barking
all alone.

The cat remains silent with no
one in mind.

And like her, I have been writing
this

in silence, moving only my lips
over the words lined up in their
pews,

but now I see I have gone and
said them all to you.

Ireland Floating on a Map of the World

With Lough Neagh serving as one
eye,
the body of Ireland looks this
morning
like nothing less than a rabbit or
a hare
caught mid-flight in a mighty
westward leap.

With the Ring of Kerry and Beara
as the springing hind legs
and jutting Mayo as its tender
forepaws,
the rabbit, or again possibly a
hare,

is turning his head to look back
at the middle part of Britain
around the Lake District, say, or
Hadrian's Wall,
and thinking nothing but
pleasant thoughts

about the America where he will
eventually
land, for he is only famous for his
leaping.

The Flash Card

The real jazz insiders
like to refer to it as “the flash card,”
or if they don’t, they should,
or at least they could come up with
some name for it.

What is the matter with these
people anyway?

Would it not help to have a term
to describe a sequence of notes
so brilliant that the rest of the solo
turns into wallpaper behind it
yet the musician absolutely refuses
to repeat it?

He played it with such felicity
we know he could easily play it
again,
passing the phrase through a ring
of keys,
even cruising it around the circle
of fifths,
but the man stone-cold refuses to
give us another taste.

There's a name for that little
indentation
between your upper lip and your
nose
(I can't think of it right now)
and the Japanese have a special
word
for the act of looking at cherry
trees in bloom.
So why shouldn't we have a name
for this?
"The Tease?" "The Now-You-See-
It?"
Surely, there is room in the box of
jive
for another bit of lingo.

Language belongs to its users,
right?
Not to the professors and
lexicographers
in their baggy jackets flecked with
chalk dust.

How about it, people? Can you stop
nodding
and drumming on the table with a
swizzle stick?

Can we work as a team for once?
Win one for Prez? For Bud?

Anniversary

The moment I turned a corner
into a quiet side street
of an unfamiliar city,

I ran into the realization
that you had died
exactly nine years ago today,

which led me to imagine a baby
born on the day you died,

a child who would always remain
the same age as your death
and whose birthday parties
would be secret memorials to
you.

As time passed, more people
would meet this growing person,

but fewer and fewer people
would remember who you were

until one day when no one
would be alive
to remember you, not even me

or the make-believe boy
whom I contrived that day,

as my bicycle leaned against a
tree
on a leafy side street,
somewhere in Philadelphia.

Early People

*Little is known about the Iberian
people
called the Laietani
sounds like the unpromising
beginning
of a term paper, does it not?
I'm guessing a C-minus at best.*

But a better performance
than the paper that went:
*Little is known about the writer
Edgar Allan Poe,
for he left behind only his dates
which are Born 1809 Died 1849.
In conclusion, it's sad for anyone
to be dead for such a long time.*

Teaching is a noble and time-
honored profession,
but little is known about it
because no one is allowed in the
classroom
except the teacher and the
students.

The students don't take notes
anymore,
and the teacher will forget
everything
she said by lunchtime,
or she has been saying the same
thing
for twenty or thirty years, or both.

Twenty or thirty years is not a long
time
when you consider the Laietani
people,
the smoke from whose fires rose
over the Iberian peninsula
even before the marauding
Romans arrived
to give everyone an inferiority
complex
with their alphabet, their
aqueducts,
frigidaria, the important process of
fermentation,
and their martial skills—
all those legions, phalanxes,
vanguards, and catapults.

And that pretty much does it
regarding the Laietani,

although about the ancient Romans
much is known,
too much to go into really
given the strict parameters of this
assignment.

*My Father's Office, John
Street, New York City, 1953*

He would take me with him when I
was a boy,
before it became a thing to do,
the two of us riding the subway,
then walking a few confining
blocks
to the insurance company where
he worked.

There, he would set me free to
roam
up and down the long rows of
typists,
clacking away on their manual
machines,
fingernails red and hands blue
from the carbon paper, famous
then
for working the miracle of
triplicates.

The place was an Avalon of
supplies—

reams of paper, envelopes neat in
their boxes,
even a franking machine, your
own private post office.
Sometimes I would stop to look
down
on the wide expanse of New York
Harbor,
never guessing how many of the
office's
rituals and devices would soon
disappear for good
into the gaping maw of
obsolescence.
Now the oasis of the water cooler is
gone,
and silenced is the aggregate racket
of typing.

Blown away is the haze of smoke
from cigarettes.
Gone, the ashtrays from every desk
and the tall ones by the elevators,
their sand kept smooth and clean
as if tended every night by a tiny
man with a tiny rake.

No more thick tear-off calendars,

the days disappearing one page at
a time.

No more fountain pen drawing
nectar from the black flower of an
ink bottle.

No more black rotary phone,
ringing with good news, bad news,
and worse.

Gone, the switchboard and the
intercom,
the cable room, Rolodex, and
Dictaphone.

Gone, too, the many paperweights,
which weighed down the stacks of
papers,
so they wouldn't blow away
on a hot summer day with the
windows wide open,
fans oscillating this way and that,
and men in shirtsleeves leaning
out high windows to catch a
breeze.

Goodbye to the hat rack and the
hats they held,

and gone the men themselves and
gone my father,
gone my father as well.

Farewell, adding machine,
and the spindles where memos
were impaled.
They went away while you were
out.

But stay, oh paper clip,
and stay, too, rubber band,
keepers of order, logic, and sense
in the days of saloons and
nightsticks,
evening editions, and newsreels

and still in these days when they
both
dwell in the drawer of a worker
in a cubicle in a tower of glass.

She is bent over a glowing screen,
her hand on a mouse
that she is using to download an
elephant,
of all things, and to print out its
picture in color,

the huge creature slipping through
a wire
then materializing in her hand, a
new miracle in triplicate.

April 21st

It's the birthday of John Muir and
Charlotte Brontë,
born just 18 years apart,
she in Yorkshire and he
somewhere in Scotland,
both in their bassinets under the
same grey clouds,
but then their lives diverge so
wildly
you might question the claims of
astrology,
if you haven't had the sense to do
that already.

Muir heads off to Wisconsin (with
his parents, I suppose),
whereas Charlotte is placed in a
nearby boarding school.
Muir then stomps all over North
America,
exulting in Nature and writing it all
down,
while Charlotte stays mostly
indoors, composing poems
with her sisters, Emily and Anne.

He leaves us *Picturesque California*,
she *Jane Eyre*.

I don't have much on my calendar
for today,
another April 21st featuring a walk
around the lake,
then boxing up the cat and driving
her to the vet.

It's overwhelming to think of all
the things

I'm not doing today, including
being born.

But I will say that my life, maybe
like yours,

falls somewhere between John
Muir's and Charlotte Brontë's.

My morning walk takes under an
hour,

but I do pay attention to the water
and the birds,

and here I am writing a poem, just
like the Brontë sisters.

Muir was blinded for a spell,

Charlotte married then died still
pregnant,

and I've had the same headache for
more than a month.

And if that's what ends up killing
me,

would someone please slide this
poem
into a side pocket of the coat they
bury me in?

Until then, let us picture John Muir
on a windy mountaintop in Oregon
waving in the direction of the
coastal dunes,

while Charlotte Brontë lifts her
head

from her morning prayers,
remembering that it's her
birthday.

Massage

i

Face down
in that cushioned horseshoe,
the face cradle,
I watched her shoes appear, then
disappear.

ii

Where else could you hear such
music?
Unless you came across a
waterfall
with a naked man
sitting under it playing the flute.

iii

The one in San Diego
could have been a kindly aunt
applying sunscreen to my back
when I was about four,

but I would have told
the one in Rochester every top
secret
I knew and invented some others.

iv

While the right leg is being
rubbed,
the left leg is thinking *I'm next*.

v

When I muttered *sorry*
for dozing off,
she said *no worries*.
She only minded
the crying, which more people do
than you would think when they
are touched.

vi

When she lifted the sheet
for me to turn over,
it felt like a dream, or the
afterlife.
A dream about the afterlife.

Afterward,
I wanted to shake both
of her hands goodbye,
but one was occupied
with the offer of a paper cup of
water.

Hotel Rex

Looming over the little sewing kit
and the miniature bottles

of shampoo and conditioner,
I am a giant, a colossus,

a king standing before the royal
mirror
in an enormous robe of
terrycloth.

As a sign of my benevolence,
I will forego coffee,

scrambled eggs, and toast
from room service and check out
early

before my tiny subjects arrive
to wash their hair and mend
their simple attire.

Going for a Walk as the Drugs Kick In

It's Friday, and the sun's all over
everything
after a long week of steady rain.
The clouds have moved on
to hover over other counties.
The irises are showing their
white faces
streaked with yellow and purple.
The bees are out again
making their floral visitations.
The beaver swims with a stick in
his mouth.
The otter is looking out his
window.
The butterfly doesn't seem to
know where it's going.
So ample and worthy is the air
around me,
I am only able to take in one bird
at a time.
A fruit tree has started to sing.

The little town is farther away
than ever.

I have my arm around the otter,
holding him by the shoulder.

The scene out his window is so
plentiful
and everything is billowing with
our love.

*For Laura,
treasured friend and patron*